

Statement by Senator Patty Murray
Women and Aging: Bearing the Burden of Long Term Care
February 6, 2002

Thank you Chairman Mikulski and Chairman Breaux for your leadership on this issue and for calling this unique hearing. When I look at issues like long term care, I think back to my own experiences in my family starting with my mother. My Mother was my hero. She was the best basketball player on her team where she grew up in Butte Montana. She went to college to become a pharmacist. She loved every Notre Dame team and could name all the players and could recite all the scores. She raised 7 kids on a shoestring budget.

When I was 15, my Dad was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and had to quit his job, so Mom worked. She got every one of us kids off to college, and she worked full time as my Dad's caregiver. When other mothers were taking trips to Hawaii after their kids were grown, my mom was lifting my dad out of bed and dressing him every single morning. When her friends learned to play bridge and golf, my mom learned how to get a motorized wheel chair in and out of the car. When other moms cared for grandchildren, my mom was making dinner and feeding my dad.

My mom never became a pharmacist. My mom only took one trip -- one that she treasured forever -- when she came to Washington DC to see her daughter become a U.S. Senator. My mom never got to go to the opera or see a movie with friends or go out to lunch with her neighbors. You know: she never complained even when it affected her own health. In my memory, she was one of the happiest people alive. She accepted her role as a caregiver. But I think for many families like my own, caregiving is cloaked in silence.

Caregivers like my mom can't speak out for one simple but important reason: they don't want the person they are caring for to ever feel they are a burden. So we must speak out for them.

Today both my parents are gone. But thousands of people are at home today silently taking care of someone they love. They need us to speak out. And I see two proposals that could help.

First, we should double funding for the family caregiver support program. Senator Mikulski has proposed this, and I fully support it. Second, I still think we need a respite care benefit under Medicare. You'll recall that in 1997, President Clinton proposed this idea. It would provide vital relief for family members who are caring for an aging relative in the home. Even if it only provides up to 72 hours a year of respite care, it would be a lifeline for thousands of families.

My mother was a hero because she worked in silence. But today, we can help break that silence and give families the support they need as they care for loved ones. I'm grateful to Senators Mikulski and Breaux for holding this hearing and allowing us to do the right thing for so many people who are caring for a family member in silence.